Britain: Children's charity finds risk of "social apartheid"

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9 September 2013

A new report produced by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) is a damning indictment of the conditions facing working-class children in Britain.

The NCB is known for its groundbreaking investigation, carried out in 1973, into the effects of poverty on children's lives. The resulting "Born to Fail" study stimulated a public debate in which it was broadly accepted that the fact that such levels of child poverty could exist in Britain could only be seen as a failure of society. Politicians vowed to address the problems and vanquish the stigma of child poverty.

Forty years on, the picture is worse. The NCB's latest study, entitled "Greater Expectations", looked at 12 key indicators to examine the levels of inequality and disadvantage that is the lot of children in Britain today.

In their press release announcing the study, the NCB stated, "Greater Expectations compares data on different aspects of children's lives today with a groundbreaking national cohort study of 11-year-olds published in 1973. It finds that significantly more children grow up in poverty today, 3.5m compared to 2m, and these children suffer devastating consequences throughout their lives…"

Amongst the key indicators used to compile the report were:

• The number of children living in poverty.

• Proportions of children living in poverty by family circumstances.

• Proportion of babies born with a low birth weight.

• Children living in overcrowded housing or temporary accommodation.

• Proportion of UK children aged 9 months to 3 years unintentionally injured at home.

• Proportion of children reporting two or more unfavourable environmental conditions.

Explaining the choice of indicators used to produce the report, the NCB stated that these are "now supported by such a compelling evidence base that they are widely considered to be critically important in determining both a child's well-being and their well-becoming, as well as their future life chances."

Comparing the lives of disadvantaged children today with those featured in the "Born to Fail" report, the NCB notes: "although there have been some improvements, overall the situation appears to be no better, and in some respects has got worse. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to be much worse off than their peers."

The report noted, "Health inequalities still exist today and with the rise of obesity are arguably getting worse. Babies from lower socio-economic backgrounds continue to be more likely to be born underweight, which can have long term effects on health and learning… Boys living in deprived areas are three more times likely to be obese than boys growing up in wealthy areas…girls…twice as likely, which has serious consequences for their long-term health as they are more vulnerable to diseases such as diabetes."

On housing conditions, it noted that although the numbers now living in poor quality, overcrowded accommodation was less than in 1969; at nearly 800,000 the number was still high and that; "the most recent data shows a worrying rise in the number of children living in temporary accommodation such as bed and breakfast."

The two reports noted that children in poor accommodation were more likely to suffer household accidents such as scalding and that this likelihood had increased.

The disadvantaged background of children continues to have a negative impact on their educational outcomes. The educational attainment at age 11 and

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general school leaving examination results at 16 for poor children is far lower than for their more socially advantaged peers.

The report went on to explain: “Having access to good local environments, such as parks and green spaces, is a far greater challenge for children today, compared with children growing up in the late 1960s. In 1969 disadvantaged children had the same level of access as their peers to outdoor leisure facilities…this is not the case today. Children living in the least deprived areas are nine times more likely than those living in most deprived areas to enjoy good local environments for play and recreation.”

Summing up its findings, the NCB report notes: “The fact that poverty and inequality experienced by our children remains just as prevalent today as it did nearly 50 years ago and must not be ignored…there is real risk of sleepwalking into a world where inequality and disadvantage are so deeply entrenched that our children grow up in a state of social apartheid.”

A September 4 Channel 4 news report echoed the appalling levels of poverty amongst children today revealed in the NCB report. It reported Office of National Statistics figures highlighting pockets of deep poverty. Levels of households without work, for example, were quoted for Glasgow at 30 percent and Liverpool 28 percent. Nationally for those in work, fully 20 percent earned less than a living wage.

The Channel 4 report explained how these levels of poverty were affecting children. In a survey of school support staff carried out by the Unison public sector trade union, 79 percent reported children arriving in class each day hungry.

A research project carried out by Dr Charlotte Evans of Leeds University looked at video diaries of 2,500 children. The research showed that 10 percent of the children were only consuming half the calories needed to maintain health. Also featured in the report was Camila Batmanghelidjh, founder and CEO of Kids Company, which cares for severely disadvantaged children in London. She told Channel 4 that her organisation feeds 3,000 children each day and that 85 percent of the children are reliant on Kids Company for their main meal in the evening.

Channel 4 interviewed Carmel McConnell, founder of the Magic Breakfast organisation, which feeds 8,000 school children each day. She explained between half a million to a million children go to school each day too hungry to learn. She added that half of teachers are bringing in food each day to feed their pupils and that last year 10,000 children were admitted to hospital suffering malnutrition.

Asked by the interviewer “why are they hungry”, she replied, “The core issue is lack of money.”

Unlike the 1973 report, these latest findings have received barely any coverage, let alone a sympathetic response from the media and official parties.

The reason is that far from “sleep walking” into social apartheid, this has been the deliberate strategy of the ruling elite. Since the late 1970s the bourgeoisie, with the aid of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, has carried out an unprecedented transfer of wealth away from working people to the super-rich.

The conditions highlighted by the NCB are only the start. Britain is now five years into the largest package of austerity measures ever undertaken since the 1930s—measures, moreover, which are being replicated across Europe and which have the unanimous support of the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats.

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